

# Activism and Social Media

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On my honor as a University student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments.

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## Activism and Social Media

Pew Research Center (2018) found that “majorities of Americans *do* believe [social media] sites are very or somewhat important for accomplishing a range of political goals.” Black Lives Matter, created in 2013, does this by “working for a world where Black lives are no longer systematically targeted for demise” (Black Lives Matter, 2020a). Blue Lives Matter is a counter-movement to Black Lives Matter, created in 2014. Its stated goal is “to provide a counterbalance to the dangerous false narratives being propagated about law enforcement” (Berg, 2017). These groups use social media differently in strategy, platform, and organizational tactics; understanding how can illuminate how each group pushes its agenda.

The American Dialect Society’s 2014 word of the year was #BlackLivesMatter, justified by Zimmer because “it demonstrates how powerfully a hashtag can convey a succinct social message” (American Dialect Society, 2015). Blue Lives Matter aim to support police officers against being “under siege” and assassinated (LA Times, 2015). Pew Research Center (2018) found that 65 percent of Americans attribute social media can “help give a voice to underrepresented groups,” an expressed view of many Black Lives Matter members. However, 71 percent also believe that social media can “make people think they’re making a difference when they really aren’t.”

Black Lives Matter is an organized group, but not a homogeneous one. Analysis of the Twitter search term *Black Lives Matter* from October 23 to 30, 2019, shows that most tweets by members and advocates are news, mild social commentary, or expressions of grief. Twitter user

*@Blkandproud365* (2019) stated: “A Black mother is fighting for justice for her 8-year-old son after the child’s sexual assault case was dismissed without prejudice Friday.” Some are more aggressive, such as *@localmemethief* (2019), who claimed that “if you got a problem with Black Lives Matter you f\*\*\*\*n racist, how you mad that we don’t want cops killing us.” Others push for social change by interacting with other groups, like Twitter user *@xJDMMAx* (2019), who claimed that if Blue Lives Matter cared about unarmed murder, then “maybe we’d actually be able to move forward” with policing. Groups such as the Southern Poverty Law Center and American Civil Liberties Union have also shown support for Black Lives Matter.

Blue Lives Matter is a less organized group than Black Lives Matter; much of its following is found on Facebook. Comments on the *@bluematters* Facebook posts reveal that supporters share traits in common with supporters of Black Lives Matter. Some simply support police; others use harsher rhetoric. Facebook account *@bluematters* posted a Trump supporter pepper spraying protestors at an anti-Trump rally. Most commenters agree with Vicki Dick, who stated: “He should not have done that. He was the one being aggressive and I disagree with aggression. Defend all you want” (Dick, 2019). However, Gloria Passenheim stated: “Well, if they're determined to behave like animals, what other recourse is there” (Passenheim, 2019). Police units and unions have both shown support for Blue Lives Matter.

Less organized or prominent groups also participate. All Lives Matter is a slogan used by an unorganized group on social media platforms to counter #BlackLivesMatter and show solidarity with others. Twitter user *@ItsDejaaa\_xoxo* (2015) tweeted “Praying for less violence and police related deaths and more love and understanding in 2016 #AllLivesMatter #BlackLivesMatter.” Police have engaged with both groups. NYPD police commissioner James

O'Neill made a statement announcing firing the officer who killed Eric Garner, claiming "There are absolutely no victors here today – not the Garner family, not the community at-large, and certainly not the courageous men and women of this police department" (O'Neill, 2019).

Black Lives Matter and Blue Lives Matter thrive because of (not despite) each other, as they use each other to generate publicity.

### **Review of Research**

According to Kraut et al. (1998) in the earlier days of the internet, greater use "was associated with small, but statistically significant declines in social involvement" and "with increases in loneliness," an effect that persists. Users are attracted to these sites, according to Lin and Lu (2011), because "the number of peers and perceived complementarity effectively reinforce" their "usefulness and enjoyment." Kahn and Kellner (2004) conclude that the internet is used across the political spectrum to "promote their own agendas and interests."

Valenzuela (2013) found that social media is linked to protest behavior through expressing opinions and mobilization. Tufekci and Wilson (2012) showed that on the first day of the Tahrir Square protests, demonstrators used interpersonal communication, including social media. Juris argued that social media aided the decentralization of *#Occupy* movements, allowing for more diverse participants.

Social media such as Twitter can be used for mobilization. Wasilewski et al. (2018) concluded that "using Twitter enhanced the overall reach of study-related tweets" and led to greater research recruitment. González-Bailón et al. (2011) claim that Twitter plays a major role in protests because it "combines the global reach of broadcasters with local, personalized

relations.” Small (2011) claimed that “informing is the primary purpose of a political hashtag,” thus distinguishing between political hashtags and activism movements.

Hughes et al. (2012) argue that Twitter and Facebook attract different personalities. Facebook users were “more gregarious and sociable” while Twitter users were “seeking cognitive stimulation.” Correa et al. (2010) found a positive correlation between extroversion and social media use in general.

### **Inception of Black Lives Matter**

The inception of Black Lives Matter mostly served to mobilize and educate. George Zimmerman faced a second-degree murder charge of Trayvon Martin, a teenager African-American student (Hamacher & Emmanuel, 2012). Zimmerman was found not guilty (CNN, 2013). Alicia Garza made a Facebook post with the phrase “Black Lives Matter,” inspiring the Twitter hashtag (Black Lives Matter, 2020b). The creators of Black Lives Matter state they “created #BlackLivesMatter as an online community to help combat anti-Black racism across the globe” (Black Lives Matter, 2020b).

The phrase “black lives matter” was used after the initial shooting in order to spread a message of equality. Twitter user *@VdotW* (2013) proposed “Why should black lives matter? — because we're human. created by and in the image of god.” *@meoskop* (2012) expressed hope for the future: “I hope (but do not expect) that Trayvon's legacy could be making black lives matter as much as white ones. But no other death has done that.” Groups on Facebook were also created, generally spreading news and statistics (Black Lives Matter, 2015).

After Zimmerman's acquittal, Twitter users quickly adopted the hashtag for mobilization and spreading knowledge. *@OccupyLA* (2013) posted live updates of protests: "march chanting 'rising up!' About 2 pass Carson Rd. going e. On Wilshire." *@Jasmyne* (2013) posted pictures and updates from multiple protests at the time. *@daniellemkali* (2013) spread news through the hashtag: "Florida Gov Refuses Black Students Demands on Zimmerman Verdict: Tells Them to Go Home."

Twitter users also used the hashtag to vocalize support. Twitter user *@JessheartsLA* (2013) stated "Love and light to all my warriors in Beverly Hills right now. All power to the people!!" *@amiagogo* (2013) commented with "rally put together in a day and a half, in awe." *@LaPenaCultural* (2013) made a more political claim: "Broken system/broken culture. Let's shift the way we value life & each other #blacklivesmatter."

Over a year later, the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter was mainly used to show remorse or express political opinions.. On July 17, 2014, Eric Garner was choked by a police officer during his arrest. Twitter user *@CharleneCac* (2014) stated "Eric Garners murder = systemic state violence against Black bodies. #BlackLivesMatter." *@ShanaRedmond* (2014) appealed to Garner having sold loose cigarettes by stating "Apparently unemployment is an adequate consequence for murder." *@hazzardeuce* (2014) responded to seeing footage of Garner: "as Mr. Garner said right before his death 'I'm tired of it. This stops today.'"

Subsequent cases continued to show mobilization and education as primary focuses. On Aug. 9, 2014, Michael Brown was fatally shot by a police officer (DOJ 2015). Twitter user *@atticascott4ky* (2014) posted a picture for solidarity, stating "showing up for #justice in #Ferguson." *@LgnCtn* (2014) mobilized some Black Lives Matter supporters to protest: "We are

trying to coordinate rides to #Ferguson b/c #BlackLivesMatter.” The ACLU of Massachusetts made a political claim on Twitter as a result: “If we want justice in the United States, we need to demilitarize our police” (@ACLU\_Mass, 2014).

Black Lives Matter saw support and criticism from various organizations. The Southern Poverty Law Center (Cohen, 2016) defended Black Lives Matter against claims that they are a hate group by claiming they are not supremacist nor black separatists. The American Civil Liberties Union (2015) also showed support for Black Lives Matter: “systemic reform on a national scale is necessary.” Michael Leary (2020), president of the Boston Police Patrolmen’s Association, advocated against Black Lives Matter as they are “an anti-police organization whose activities have the effect of making my members less safe.”

### **Response to Black Lives Matter**

Some found “Black Lives Matter” decisive and made the counter phrase “All Lives Matter.” Twitter user @fitch87 (2013) put this to words, stating “I’m sad and all but where is the outrage for the others. People killed everyday and nobody gives a f\*\*k. #AllLivesMatter” @byshefon (2013) was criticized for using a Black Lives Matter sign and responded with “Of course all lives matter. I needed to remind not only others, but myself that Black bodies are valuable. That our children are human.” Others were more aggressive; @tweetsgohere (2013) stated “Saying one person's death is more insignificant than another's is borderline psychotic. All lives matter, period.”

Twitter users began to contend the usefulness of the phrase “All Lives Matter” after the Michael Brown case. Twitter user @skymanhill (2014) replied to a statement that “Black Lives

Matter” by stating “ALL LIVES MATTER!!!! Stop being racist.” Most users respond with solidarity for Black Lives Matter and All Lives Matter, such as *@SteveWHawkins* (2014), who stated “Watching reports out of #Ferguson with a heavy heart. #AllLivesMatter & all people deserve to live free from discrimination & violence.” Twitter user *@jazzyspraxis* (2014) responded to this sentiment: “Generally people who say #AllLivesMatter are white & trying to derail the conversation and separate #Ferguson from anti-blackness.” Twitter user *@joemacare* (2014) responded to “trolls” by stating “My hate is pure for people who troll the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag to say ‘ah, so I suppose other lives don't matter?’ Read a history book.”

In a response to supposed counter-racism, some started using the hashtag #WhiteLivesMatter to counter Black Lives Matter. Twitter user *@xococo\_\_* (2014) expressed this opinion: “Black people can say #BlackLivesMatter but when a white person say #WhiteLivesMatter they’re racist.” Many responded with antagonism, such as Twitter user *@ReginaxGore* (2014), who stated “The fact #WhiteLivesMatter is a real hashtag makes my stomach do a thing.” Twitter user *@jeninmotion* (2014) offered advice: “If #WhiteLivesMatter tweeters are really upset about unarmed white men being shot, they ought to see #Ferguson protests as guide, not threat.”

Phrases such as “White Lives Matter” and “All Lives Matter” are counter voices that help Black Lives Matter spread its message. The Southern Poverty Law Center (n.d.) claimed that White Lives Matter “is a neo-Nazi group that is growing into a movement.” Twitter user *@TaePhoenix* (2019) proposed that “If you consider [everyone being of equal value] a threat to your own worthiness, ask why.” *@nealocity* (2014) created a comparison: “Turning

#BlackLivesMatter in #AllLivesMatter is like turning #YesAllWomen to #YesAllPeople. You take away the importance of the movement.”

### **Inception of Blue Lives Matter**

Blue Lives Matter launched as a counter-movement to Black Lives Matter in support of police officers. On December 20, 2014, the Blue Lives Matter about page claimed “NYPD Officer Rafael Ramos and Officer Wenjian Liu were ambushed and murdered by a fanatic who believed the lies of Black Lives Matter” (Berg, 2017). The hashtag #BlueLivesMatter saw limited use before this, such as @SnowBopp (2014), who stated “Take personal responsibility. Support #ThinBlueLine not #riots because #PoliceLivesMatter #CopsLivesMatter #BlueLivesMatter.”

Blue Lives Matter soon became a decisive force that sparked more aggressive responses from Black Lives Matter supporters. Twitter user @WayneDupreeShow (2014) showed solidarity: “I support the #NYPDLivesMatter because #BlueLivesMatter #NYPD.” Some attempt to take a middle ground, such as Twitter user @OrlandoLiberal (2014), who stated “#BlueLivesMatter just like #BlackLivesMatter & #WhiteLivesMatter.” Black Lives Matter supporters, however, showed antagonism to the movement, such as @\_theghettomonk (2014), who claimed “Saying #BlueLivesMatter or wearing police paraphernalia is a clear statement that you are ok with Black folk being unjustifiably killed.” Twitter user @FinleyCFS (2014) praised NFL player Nick Mangold for wearing an NYPD hat after the incident, stating “Utmost respect for @nickmangold for supporting our #NYPD #BlueLivesMatter.”

Many Blue Lives Matter supporters use Facebook. Facebook user Kelly Yeager-Clayborn (2014) stated “Blue Lives Matter -> they are special servants of God!!” Leslie Sanders (2014) showed support as well: “That thin blue line that stands between Law & Order & Lawlessness was dealt a horrific blow today. Pray for the slain officer's familys and the united states of America!” On March 25, 2020, the Blue Lives Matter Facebook page was liked by over 2.2 million accounts (Blue Lives Matter, 2020).

Blue Lives Matter was met with praise and controversy by many groups. Los Angeles Police Department joined Blue Lives Matter supporters in protests in 2015 (LAPD, 2018). Black Lives Matter (Black Lives Matter, 2018) responded to so called “Blue Lives Matter Bills” by saying “We reject any notion that this bill or any future bills should be called ‘Blue Lives Matter’ on a local, state or national level. It creates a false parallel between this bill and the larger Movement for Black Lives.”

### **High-Profile Cases**

High-profile cases that Black Lives Matter support is generally cordial. On July 5, 2016, Alton Sterling was shot to death by officers during an altercation, causing outrage among Black Lives Matter advocates (Ortiz & Johnson, 2016). Black Lives Matter supporters like Twitter user *@sergeibaka* (2016) responded with solidarity: “The deaths of #AltonSterling and #PhilandoCastile are a huge tragedy... We can't accept this events to keep happening!!!” Others used the publicity to clarify the movement’s goals, such as Twitter user *@unusualcoconut* (2016), who stated “People fail to realize that no one is saying that all lives don't matter. We're just reminding yall that black lives do.” Blue Lives Matter supporters like *@IbackSpace\_hoez*

(2016) defended police officers as a whole on #BlueLivesMatter: “Don't get me wrong I think police brutality is a horrible thing but not all police officers are crooked.” Some Black Lives Matter supporters responded on #BlueLivesMatter with objections to the movement, making up a significant portion of the posts, like @Marley\_\_Monroe (2016), who stated, “#BlueLivesMatter is clearly a trend that mocks #BlackLivesMatter. Shameful!”

High-profile Blue Lives Matter cases tend to be met with controversy alongside solidarity. Five police officers were left dead on July 7, 2016, in Dallas, Texas, after a military veteran set out to kill white officers due to the death of Alton Sterling (Fernandez, et al., 2016). Blue Lives Matter supporters showed solidarity on Facebook; Josh Small (2016) stated “My prayers and heart is in Dallas tonight.” Other supporters use the replies to make political statements, such as user Jesus Torres (2016): “When a Cop shoots someone, #Obama blames the Cop. When a Terrorist shoots someone, Obama blames the Gun.” In response to the article title claiming the terrorist was a Black Lives Matters member, Ronise Johnson (2016) contended, “But the Sniper wasn't affiliated with Black Lives Matter.. Why are we grouping an entire organization based on one sniper? Isn't that similar to classifying all cops as racists because a few kill black men at their leisure?” Some Black Lives Matter supporters responded on Twitter, such as @mostudys (2016), who claimed “#BlueLivesMatter is really just a coded, racist rhetoric used to silence the trauma of black folks & invalidate our lives.”

### **Low-Profile Cases**

Low-profile cases also show Black Lives Matter supporters responding to the incident and the movement's opposition. On October 12, 2019, “Atatiana Jefferson was fatally shot” by a

police officer (Alvarez, 2019). Black Lives Matter supporters, like Twitter user *@RAICESTEXAS* (2019), showed solidarity: “We stand in solidarity with Atatiana's family & the #BlackLivesMatter movement.” Others are more aggressive, like Twitter user *@\_karenjgonzalez* (2019), who stated “If black people aren’t safe in their own homes, where exactly can they be safe?” A minority went to #BlueLivesMatter, such as *@\_dagray* (2019), who asked “Dear #BlueLivesMatter folks... what’s your excuse this time?” Twitter user *@AmericasDivided* (2019) responded in support of #BlueLivesMatter: “I won’t hear anyone who tries to pick a few bad apples and make all other apples seem bad.”

Many people and organizations show support for fallen police officers, even in low-profile cases. On February 9, 2020, two officers survived a suspected assassination attempt (Haworth, et al., 2020). Blue Lives Matter supporters, like Twitter user *@JoeBorelliNYC* (2020), showed support on Twitter with #BlueLivesMatter: “The war on cops is real, and I’m glad so many are supporting this officer.” The Sergeants Benevolent Association (SBA, 2016) work “on behalf of New York’s sergeants” to advocate for “the men and women who serve as the ‘Finest of the Finest.’” The SBA got responded to the police attack, tweeting “Mayor DeBlasio, the members of the NYPD are declaring war on you!” (*@SBANYPD*, 2020a). They claim “the NYPD can no longer tolerate the anti police behavior” (*@SBANYPD*, 2020b).

Black Lives Matter supporters continue to criticize the Blue Lives Matter, even after low-profile cases. Black Lives Matter supporters responded on the hashtag #BlueLivesMatter with responses like user *@lctheders* (2020), who stated: “being a cop is a choice, being black is not,” therefore black people cannot take themselves out of danger. Other supporters, such as *@sirjamesa12* (2020), used the opportunity to claim “#bluelivesmatter is an anti-Black, fascist

term specifically created to defend the institutions of the police and paints those challenging that institution as uncivilized brutes.” Twitter user *@philosophrob* (2020) responded on #BlackLivesMatter to #BlueLivesMatter trending on Twitter, stating “Nobody's born blue. Becoming a police officer is a choice. Being black is not.” Facebook user Marge Hurley (2020) stated in support of Blue Lives Matter, “Sick of hearing another officer shot or injured!!! We need all our police officers. Back the Blue!!”

## **Conclusion**

Black Lives Matter and Blue Lives Matter largely thrive by the other's existence. Opposition is key to pursuing activism and spreading ideas. Both groups use opposition to their agenda, but Black Lives Matter travels further outside of its own community. These cases are useful to understand how an activist group can be started and maintained effectively to promote social change using social media. The effects of the two strategies could be researched in order to better understand the impact of each approach to activism on social media. More strategies exist for activism on social media. Black Lives Matter and Blue Lives Matter display two strategies that have been effective at garnering support. Other groups that consider such strategies should study how both groups made them effective in activism.

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